


ORAL/WRITTEN TESTIMONY
ON BEHALF OF THE
ONLINE LEARNING CONSORTIUM AND THE
UNITED STATES DISTANCE LEARNING ASSOCIATION
SUBMITTED TO THE MASSACHUSETTS EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF EDUCATION
IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE PUBLIC MEETING OF THE SPECIAL COMMISSION ON
INTERSTATE RECIPROCITY AGREEMENTS
SEPTEMBER 14, 2016




My name is Kathleen Ives, and I serve as the Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director for the Online Learning Consortium (OLC). I received my doctorate via online education and, in addition to my OLC duties, I currently serve as an online, post-secondary, adjunct instructor for Wentworth Institute of Technology.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to offer comments on behalf of the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) and the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) - both located here in Boston - regarding interstate reciprocity agreements as a path to authorizing accredited degree-granting institutions of higher education in the Commonwealth to voluntarily participate by providing distance learning programs to students of other states. OLC is a nonprofit association representing academic leaders, administration, faculty, and staff at more than 650 U.S. public and private colleges and universities. We have partnered with various like-minded organizations, like the USDLA, which represents numerous distance learning constituencies including K-12, higher education, corporate, government, military and telehealth.


Both OLC and USDLA are deeply involved and committed to offering quality postsecondary distance education, to educate constituents in our members' states about the positive impact of State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA) on students in terms of consumer protection, access, and affordability. Additionally, this topic continues to be highlighted at our conferences, our research, our peer-reviewed journal, and our professional development reaching thousands annually. For instance, in 2015, our Annual Accelerate Conference was host to 2,903 total attendees (1,723 on site and 1,180 virtual). In addition, thus far this year, we have enrolled over 2,000 people in our various professional development opportunities and *Online Learning*, our open access peer-reviewed journal has been downloaded more than 9,000 times. Additionally, we currently engage close to 14,000 active twitter followers and over 7,000 active LinkedIn members.


STATE OF HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY


**The changing face of higher education.**






THAT WAS THEN 1965


**The typical student was 'college-aged' and full-time.**


**The federal policy architecture in support of regulation of higher education was just being established.**


**The Internet was two decades away.**





...THIS IS NOW 2016


**85% of Americans enrolled in post secondary institutions are "non-traditional" learners.¹**

**For many, the challenges of **time**, **distance**, and **cost** make online learning **more accessible**.²**

**1/4 of US students are taking at least one online course.²**




**The Internet is a necessary component of our personal, educational, and professional lives.**

**In 2012, nearly **63% of U.S. colleges offered fully-online degree programs**.³ That's almost double what it was a decade earlier, at just **32.5%**.**

**Nearly **70% of online education** occurs within the traditional **nonprofit sector**.⁴**

It's time for a Higher Education Act (HEA) for the 21st Century Learner.

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SOURCES 1. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. Choy, S. Non-traditional undergraduates. Washington, DC 2. Babson Research Survey Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC, Grade Level – Tracking Online Education, 2015 3. U.S. News & World Report, Online Course Enrollment Climbs for 10th Straight Year, January 2013 4. IPEDS Fall 2013: Higher Ed Sectors Vary Greatly in Distance Ed Enrollments, WCET Blog

Over the years, the higher education landscape has changed dramatically. Today, approximately 15% of students served by institutions are traditional, first-time, full-time freshmen¹. The other 85% are working adult learners who are completing their degree part-time; single parents who are juggling life's challenges to better their family's future, service members participating in the military voluntary education program, or young people who must work full-time to afford an education. This dynamic shift has affected the way in which today's contemporary learners complete relevant competencies, courses, certificates or degrees. While many still attend in-person classes on a campus, a growing number complete courses, and in many cases their entire degree online. Today's elementary students are learning keyboarding skills over cursive writing² and can visit museums and cultural sites using their fingertips instead of the tradition field trip.

What if online learning was everywhere? In a recent study, 70.8% of college/university administrators see online learning as being critical to their long-term strategy that is up from 48.8% in 2002³. While some equate online learning with for-profit institutions, that view simply does not reflect the reality of the higher education landscape. Today, nearly 70% of fully online education and 85% of students who learn partially online is occurring within the nonprofit sector. Just a quick look at higher education institutions in the Commonwealth showcases community colleges (e.g., Bristol Community College, Bunker Hill Community College, Quinsigamond Community College), state institutions (e.g., Framingham State University, Salem State University, Westfield State University) and private institutions (e.g., Boston University, Endicott College, Mount Ida College, Northeastern University) all offering online courses and degree programs as an option for their students. Add to that UMassOnline which offers an array of bachelor's, master's and certificate programs online (<http://www.umassonline.net/degree-finder>). Regionally accredited by New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC), these are institutions we know and trust. In addition to accessibility, research has shown that online coursework is as good or better than classroom-based learning^{4, 5, 6}. Lastly, in an increasingly global economy, having an educated workforce is a competitive advantage; therefore, it is incumbent upon institutions in the Commonwealth and beyond to increase educational attainment by making it more efficient, effective, and uniform in regard to necessary and reasonable standards of practice that could span states; more effective in dealing with quality and integrity issues that have arisen in some online/ distance education offerings; and less costly for states and institutions and, thereby, the students they serve.

CONSUMER PROTECTION

By adopting SARA, the Commonwealth will be required to establish a process for processing student complaints, providing greater protection for students taking online courses. SARA's national platform enables institutions to see trends across SARA member institutions, e.g. the number of number of complaints from out-of-state students, by institution, appealed to the state's SARA portal agency through the complaint resolution process; the resolution of those complaints in the aggregate, by SARA institutions (number resolved in favor of the person making the

¹ New America Foundation, Cracking the Credit Hour, Amy Laitin, 2012, http://newamerica.net/publications/policy/cracking_the_credit_hour.

² The Independent, Finland to remove cursive handwriting from education curriculum, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/finland-to-remove-cursive-handwriting-from-education-curriculum-10021942.html>.

³ Babson Research Survey Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC, Grade Level - Tracking Online Education, 2015, <http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/survey-reports-2014/>.

⁴ Eduventures, Making sense of the higher education technology landscape, 2014, <http://www.eduventures.com/2014/09/higher-education-landscape/>.

⁵ US Department of Education, 2010, <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>.

⁶ ITHAKA S+R, Online learning in postsecondary education, March 11, 2015, <http://sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/online-learning-postsecondary-education>.

complaint, number resolved in favor of the institution, number resolved by agreement, and number pending resolution). In fact, several of our member institutions say they have become better versed on what is happening in their own state as a result of this transparent lens to data monitoring.

ACCESS

SARA is an initiative that will make distance-education courses more accessible to students across state lines and make it easier for states to regulate and institutions to participate in interstate distance education. Currently, some students are finding their options limited as institutions choose not to serve students with onerous authorization requirements. I'd like to share one story offered to me by a military student. She was reassigned to a state where her school did not have approval to provide educational services (as currently, most online education programs regardless of whether they have a physical presence in another state – must seek approval in any state or U.S. territory in which they are required to do so); so she had to delay completing her degree.

AFFORDABILITY

Finally, SARA reduces the rapidly growing institutional cost that is passed on to students, e.g. applications, staff payroll and time. It is true that institutions with large online programs can spend thousands of dollars annually, to gain and maintain approval in other states. In many cases, these costs are passed on to students in the form of higher tuition rates. Wearing my adjunct professor hat, I can tell you first-hand, many of my students forego purchasing textbooks as the only viable way they see to reducing out-of-pocket expenses as tuition and fees increase.

CONCLUSION

Online learning is here to stay. More models will emerge to continue to push the limits of how higher education can be delivered. As discussed, many students who take online classes are nontraditional—they are older, they work full-time, and they have families. Their busy lives prevent them from attending traditional classes to earn the degrees they need to advance in their careers. Quality online learning is their solution; their way to obtain a degree that can better their career possibilities. By participating in SARA, the Commonwealth levels the playing field and increases transparency for institutions in our state as well as those in other states. For students, it enables them to complete coursework or participate in practical learning experiences (internships, practicums, student teaching, etc.) in their home state or beyond. From the perspective of the Online Learning Consortium and the United States Distance Learning Association participating in SARA is simply the right thing to do.